



CENTURY-OLD DHULU (THULU) RETURNED TO THE GAMILARAAY COMMUNITY BY THE MUSEUM DER KULTUREN BASEL, SWITZERLAND

A highly significant carved tree, known as a dhulu (thulu), will be returned on Thursday 28 November to the Gamilaraay Community from north-east New South Wales, Australia, at a formal ceremony held at the Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland.

In a profoundly generous gesture, Gamilaraay Community representatives will respond by gifting the Museum with a newly carved dhulu. The carving of the new dhulu replicates the designs of the century-old dhulu as closely as possible, thereby signifying the Community's wish that the story of Gamilaraay culture continues to be shared with the people of Switzerland, Europe and the world.

The dhulu was once part of a group of carved river red gums on Brigalow Creek, a tributary of the Namoi River. They were associated with a ceremonial ground near the small New South Wales town of Boggabri. Dhulu hold deep spiritual meaning for the Gamilaraay Community: it is an ancestor and family member; it embodies knowledge and has agency. The markings are associated with specific families, tell their story, and lend them a voice.

The dhulu was cut down in the early 20th century and transported to Sydney before its sale to a Swiss researcher, Lucas Staehelin, who gifted the dhulu to the Museum der Kulturen Basel in 1940.

The dhulu was located in 2022 during a research trip by Bundjalung, Gamilaraay and Muruwari man, Professor Brian Martin (Monash University), Yorta Yorta woman Kimberley Moulton (Curator-TATE Modern/Rising/Monash), and Boon Wurrung Senior Elder Professor N'arweet Professor Carolyn Briggs AM (Monash University) to study the significance of trees in south-east Australian Aboriginal cultures. This was part of an Australian Research Council Project *More than a Guulany (tree): Aboriginal Knowledge Systems*, led by both Brian Martin and Professor Brook Andrew.

The Gamilaraay Community — supported by the Wominjeka Djeembana Indigenous Research Lab at Monash University — worked with the Museum der Kulturen Basel on the return of the dhulu to Country. Approval for its return was given by the Basel Government in January 2024. Further support for the return was provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

At the request of the Gamilaraay Community, the century-old dhulu will be temporarily held at AIATSIS in Canberra, until the Community is ready to receive it on Country.

The Australian Government's, AIATSIS-led, Return of Cultural Heritage program works to identify and facilitate the return of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage material held in

overseas collections. Since 2018 the program has supported the return of more than 2,300 culturally significant items.

A media toolkit is available at the following [link](#).

Quotes attributable:

Gamilaraay Elder, Greg Bulingha Griffiths and Gamilaraay Representative, Wayne Griffiths Jnr

The return of the dhulu is deeply significant for us. It represents more than just an artefact coming back; it's a reconnection to our ancestral heritage and the teachings that have sustained our community for thousands of generations. The dhulu carries the stories, values, and wisdom of our ancestors. Having it come back to its homeland by the Namoi River brings a sense of healing, as if a long-separated part of our heritage is finally returning to where it belongs. For our community, it reaffirms our resilience, our identity, and the continuity of our culture that has endured for over 80,000 years.

We feel immense pride in knowing that future generations will now have the opportunity to connect with the dhulu directly, to see it, and to learn from its carvings and the stories they contain. It's a powerful feeling to know that our children will grow up with this piece of their history close to them, and that they will see a symbol of resilience, rather than loss. The return of the dhulu signifies that our culture endures, that it can be reclaimed, and that it is a source of strength and identity for our community. This return counters the painful narrative of continual loss of culture and language that our community has faced for so long. Instead, it represents renewal, demonstrating that cultural heritage can be preserved, respected, and even restored. This is a powerful reminder that our traditions, stories, and language are valued, not only by our community but also by others who recognise their significance.

The gifting of a new dhulu to the Basel Museum is a gesture of gratitude and respect for the partnership that has allowed the original dhulu to return home. This reciprocal arrangement emphasises that collaboration between museums and Aboriginal communities is not only possible but mutually beneficial. It shows that while cultural items may return to their communities, the relationships, learning, and shared respect fostered by museums remain valuable and ongoing.

Minister for Indigenous Australians, Senator the Hon Malarndirri McCarthy

Safeguarding our Indigenous cultural heritage is vital to the continuation of Australia's rich and diverse First Nations cultures and ensures the stories of our ancestors are passed on and shared for generations to come.

This century-old dhulu holds a special place in the hearts of the Gamilaraay people, both spiritually and culturally.

The dhulu's return to its rightful owners and the Gamilaraay community's beautiful gesture of gifting a newly carved dhulu to the Museum der Kulturen Basel, represents the importance of collaboration built on mutual respect in these types of repatriation efforts.

This partnership has resulted in a wonderful outcome for all parties, I'm delighted the Gamilaraay people can welcome the return of this significant cultural item, and at the same time, their story can continue to be shared with Switzerland, Europe and the world.

Australian Ambassador to Switzerland, Ms Elizabeth Day

The ceremony has helped to highlight in Switzerland the rich cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. By exchanging the traditional dhulu with a newly carved copy, the Gamilaraay Community and people of Basel demonstrated a relationship of respect, understanding and friendship. These are valuable traits in this increasingly divided world.

Director, Wominjeka Djeembana Indigenous Research Lab, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, Monash University, Professor Brian Martin

The Gamilaraay community is not 'taking' back the dhulu; the museum is 'returning' the dhulu.

This exchange emphasises the collaboration and respect between the museum and our people, marking the process as a return rather than a retrieval which helps with our healing process.

The relational return does multiple things: it demonstrates that we are not located in the ethnographic past, assists the museum in shifting their premise of 'keepers' of culture, and shows the public that repatriation does not mean the museum will be emptied.

The partnerships we have built with the museum in Switzerland have been really important, not only from an institutional perspective but also for us as Aboriginal peoples.

Having this relationship has been crucial for us to have a voice, and it has provided us a platform to discuss our culture in a visual way.

Director, Museum der Kulturen Basel, Dr Anna Schmid

We – representatives of the Gamilaraay and the museum – enjoyed a wonderful working relationship from the outset. It was characterized by openness, mutual respect and, not least, a sense of humour.

We learned a lot from our partners. What is more, this collaboration showed us once again that museums are not only teaching but also learning institutions – and there is truly a lot to learn. We have only just begun to evolve from gatekeepers to caretakers.

It was always a great pleasure to see how our partners thought about every step in the process, what it meant for the museum and how it could possibly be realized.

We look forward to continuing our collaboration in the same pleasant atmosphere, characterised by reciprocity, respect and understanding.

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous) and Senior Vice-President, Monash University, Professor Tristan Kennedy

Ensuring Indigenous voices are centred in research is one of the key priorities of Monash's new Indigenous portfolio, our Indigenous Research Action Plan as well as the university's broader Impact 2030 strategic plan

One of the ways we can support Indigenous self-determination is by ensuring community perspectives, beliefs, cultures and governance are at the centre of research practices.

Professor Martin's leadership of this initiative, in collaboration with community and cultural partners, demonstrates the role academic institutions play in fostering reconciliation and a society that recognises, respects and includes Indigenous peoples, cultures and knowledge.

Chief Executive Officer, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Mr Leonard Hill

The return of this highly significant dhulu – a beautifully carved river red gum from Boggabri, NSW – marks an important step towards safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Gamilaraay Community.

I commend the Museum der Kulturen Basel for the care they have taken in conserving this treasure, and for their collaboration with the Gamilaraay Community, Monash University and AIATSIS, that has enabled its return to Country.

I would also like to acknowledge the generosity of the Gamilaraay Community in carving a new dhulu and gifting it to the Museum. A gift that will ensure that the story of Gamilaraay culture will continue to be shared with future generations here and around the world.

I am immensely proud of the work we do at AIATSIS, particularly our work to support the return of cultural heritage material to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Work that enables the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, and healing for Australia's First Nations people.

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